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HISTORY OF CHILD LABOR REFORM IN ALABAMA

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Alabama began agitation against the child labor system in 1886. On page ninety of the Acts of the Legislature 1886-7, will be found the law passed in this state against the employment of children and women in factories and manufacturing establishments, except as therein provided. The act was crude and carried no provisions for enforcement. It showed, however, that the public mind of the state had been aroused to the necessity of protecting those in need of protection. The act of 1886 remained on the statute books until the session of the legislature in 1894-5, when it was repealed through the efforts of a lobby sent to Montgomery by the cotton mills, headed by a superintendent of one of the New England mills which had lately been established in this state.¹

There was no more child labor legislation until 1903, when, mainly through the earnest and zealous work of Edgar Gardner Murphy, the second child labor law for Alabama was enacted. The law of 1903 was by no means satisfactory to those who had been contending for an effective child labor law. The provisions of this law made the age limit twelve years, but orphans and children of dependent families were exempt.

No child under ten years of age was permitted to work under any circumstances. No child under thirteen years of age could be employed at night work, and none under twelve was allowed to work more than sixty-six hours per week.

In 1907 a more acceptable law was enacted. The age limit was placed at twelve, without exception, and night work was per-

¹ It is only fair to state that some years afterward, when the question of the re-enactment of child labor laws for Alabama again came before the legislature, a stockholder of this New England Cotton Mill came to Alabama to ascertain facts concerning the action of the above mentioned superintendent. As a result of this investigation, an effective, written protest was sent by that stockholder to the directors and stockholders of the above mentioned mill, in which strong objection was urged to the superintendent lobbying against the passage of the child labor law.

mitted only by children of sixteen years of age and over. Provision was also made for inspection, the state inspector of prisons and almshouses being empowered to inspect cotton mills and factories.

There was general disappointment over the practical failure of the inspection feature of the law of 1907. Dr. Bragg, the first inspector appointed under the new law, was taken ill soon after his appointment and died after an illness of many months. Dr. Bush, the second appointee, had occupied the position but a short while when he, too, after a lingering illness, was fatally stricken. The present inspector has been in office but a short while, but I believe he is thoroughly impressed with the importance of strict enforcement of the law and that he will do his duty in this regard.

Governor O'Neal has recommended in a message to the legislature raising the age limit of children working in cotton mills in Alabama to fourteen years. He has also pointed out a defect in our present law which has greatly weakened the statute, namely, the provision that the employer must "knowingly violate" the law before any punishment can be imposed for its violation. It will be seen at a glance that this clause affords the official of the mill, who may be employed to hire labor, an ample cloak in case he desires to shield himself from infractions of the law. Amendments to the 1907 Child Labor Act have been introduced in the present House of Representatives to conform to Governor O'Neal's recommendations, and the inspector of prisons and almshouses and cotton mills has been provided with two assistants. The mills are again actively at work to defeat the amendments which have been offered in the House of Representatives. The main lobbyist for the mills is going about making the absurd statement that raising the age limit from twelve to fourteen years will put every mill in Alabama in the hands of a receiver. This is indeed a most remarkable statement.

I think it is appropriate, in giving a history of child labor reform in Alabama, to refer to the part Alabama has taken in the organization of the National Child Labor Committee. The movement for the organization of a National Child Labor Committee was begun in Montgomery, Ala. Edgar Gardner Murphy, at that time rector of St. John's Episcopal Church, Montgomery, was the first to make suggestions as to the need for a National organization. In a pamphlet of February, 1904, in which he suggests the

organization of a National Child Labor Committee, Mr. Murphy says: "This general movement representing the common interest of earnest human forces, separately organized and laboring toward a common aim, yet without the advantages of a common understanding, has seemed to disclose the need for the existence of a national committee."

The pamphlet was signed by Felix Adler, Jane Addams, Stanley McCormick, John W. Wood, Wm. H. Baldwin, Jr., V. Everit Macy, Lillian D. Wald, Florence Kelley, Edgar Gardner Murphy.

I have in my possession a copy of a letter written by Dr. Felix Adler in which he refers to Mr. Murphy as the "father and founder" of the National Child Labor Committee. While we have not moved along as well in Alabama as we have wished, yet it is gratifying to know that Alabama was among the first of the Southern States to pass a child labor law, and that Montgomery is the birthplace of the National Child Labor Committee.